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ABSTRACT

An attempt was made to describe the experience of Christian religious education for its participants. This research is both ethnographic and hermeneutic. Thick descriptions gathered from ethnographic methods like participant observation, in-depth interviews, and journal keeping served as text for analysis. Weekly visits of one to four hours were made to each school, home, or community setting over the course of one school year. It became evident that for the two students (David and Rena) studied, activities in the home and school played a more important role in structuring their experiences than did activities in church, youth groups, or their community. Five themes emerged from the research: (1) Story; (2) Community; (3) Growth; (4) Meaning; and (5) God. The findings within each theme were understood as being in dialectical tension with theoretical dispositions. This relationship between findings and theory meant that two questions had to be asked: "How does the life-world of the students inform the initial theory?"; and "What has been affirmed or rebutted in the experience of David and Rena as a result of the theory?" The research is concluded with a definition formed by interpretation of the research themes. That is, Christian religious education is attending to and cooperating with God's activities with others. Such education is characterized by love, trust, responsibility, and discipleship. Its goal is to promote right relationships with God and others. (BZ)

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THE MEANING OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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The Meaning of Christian Education

Introduction

What is the experience of Christian religious education for its participants? The research reported in this paper was an attempt to describe the unique Christian religious education experience of two high school students. This research is both ethnographic and hermeneutic. Thick description gathered from ethnographic methods like participant observation, in-depth interviews, and journal keeping served as text for analysis. The research study sought to add to the understandings teachers, parents, and school administrators have about how young people experience life in Christian private schools, Christian homes, and in their community.

Weekly visits of one to four hours were made to each school, home, or community setting over the course of one school year. During these visits, themes emerged. It became evident that, for the students studied (David and Rena), activities in the home and school played a more robust part in structuring their experience than did activities in church, youth groups, or their community.

During the year, less time was spent as participant observer and more time was spent interviewing to gain further insight into emerging themes and to interpret experiences in greater depth. As research methods changed, I (Potvin) began to reinterpret my own Christian religious education and theoretical predispositions to

any Christian religious education. Such exploration and reinterpretation allowed me to formulate ideas of what Christian religious education might become. This "visionary" activity, along with the descriptions of the experiences of David and Rena, became the basis for my attempts to propose the implications or theories for Christian religious education found throughout this paper.

This study is potentially valuable for three reasons: (1) few studies, if any, attempt to provide in-depth insight into the unique experience of Christian high school students; (2) the study forces me to openly explore my own journey as a Christian educator; and (3) colleagues in Christian schools, churches, and communities might find insights to guide their work.

The Study

The first two months of the study were spent in the schools and homes of the students. Observations were recorded regarding behavior, interactions, and attitudes. A physical sorting of this data into categories helped me recognize themes. Teachers and parents were interviewed, and dialogue was established with David and Rena.

I attempted to become a natural part of the students' situations, because I believed that the whole context was important to really understand David's and Rena's experience. Interview data was categorized with my observations. This data was subjected to analysis for recurrances, linkages, and convergences. My analysis was continually brought back to David

and Rena for verification. Our interpretations resulted in theme building. Further interviews helped confirm initial themes. The themes that emerged were as much the insight of the participants as they were my own.

Five themes emerged from the research: (1) Story; (2) Community; (3) Growth; (4) Meaning; and, (5) God. The findings within each theme were understood as being in dialectical tension with theoretical dispositions I held as I began the study. This relationhship between findings and theory meant that two questions had to be asked: "How does the life-world of the students inform my initial theory?" "What has been affirmed or rebutted in the experience of David and Rena as a result of my theory?"

I began this research with Thomas Groome's (1981, p. 25) definition of Christian religious education.

> A political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with them to the activity of God in our present, to the story of the Christian faith community, and to the vision of God's Kingdom, the seeds of which are already among us.

I concluded this research with a definition formed by my interpretations of research themes. Christian religious education is attending to and cooperating with God's activities within and surrounding people. Such education sponsors a way of being with people that deliberately and mutually reveals God's activities throughout history, in the present, and in the future. Such education is characterized by love, trust, responsibility, and discipleship. It is brought about through relationships, with God and others. It's goal is to promote right relationships with God and others.

Theme One: Story

The term story is a metaphor that describes David's and Rena's expressions of their own traditions and histories. This theme is comprised of four sub-themes: affirmation, explanation, past, and future. The metaphor story implies a journey. David and Rena have pilgrimaged in history, place, and time. They have responded to events, people, and callings. And, they have molded the world that they see. This dialectic has helped to create two people with unique lifestyles, understandings, meaning-making potentials, and relationships with God and others. Although they are young, their lives have a depth and breadth that can easily be seen.

David and Rena want deeply to be understood. They want their stories explained without distortion. They express their desire for a greater understanding of the "external" stories that they hear and read, such as the stories of their teachers, the Bible, or literature. These stories collide with their own stories daily. There needs to be, for both David and Rena, a fruitful synthesis growing out of this collision, where each story explains and translates the other.

Part of David's story is affirmation. He seemed to cry out for affirmation, but was afraid to let people really know him. Rather than simply seeking affirmation, David sought to avoid disaffirmation. He says:

> I basically try to keep other people out of knowing why I act the way I do act. That way because if they start... watching me, they'll be disappointed...I keep a lot to myself.

For Rena, affirmation comes, in part, from being recognized for doing good. She says:

> My own conscience leads me to act the way I do; and, also, I want the approval of my Mom and the approval of what my Dad would have thought. I look up to my brothers and sisters. I respect them a lot and I want to do something so they'll respect me.

Affirmation becomes more meaningful for Rena when it resonates with her own experience. She adds:

> ...it's religious education along with my own experience. I know everybody has a different story and I don't know if I would turn out the same if A had happened instead of B.

"Explanation" is a second sub-theme under the theme <u>story</u>. Rena and David want their lives explained in ways that will be clear and acceptable to others. They want to be accepted and understood. They also want the world explained to them. In short, David and Rena want to know what they mean as well as what their external realities mean. To illustrate, Rena talks about explaining God to someone,

> Well, I can't prove it because it's faith...I guess that wouldn't satisfy them because I feel that the God that I've been taught about is a good and loving God and I feel that in a way my prayers are answered.

For David and Rena, explanation is primarily for meaning. For example, David talks about his parents explaining the hidden curriculum of such societal influence as drugs.

> They can tell you what they do to you, and they can tell you why they are appealing and why people get sucked into them and why they are so bad. They <u>can't</u> say "Don't do that" because they are fun. They have to explain the process from A to Z.

For both David and Rena, the meaning of an explanation is largely in the medium of that explanation. For example, David discusses Bill Gothard seminars.

> He has had living experience. A guy just doesn't get like that. I listened to him. He's not afraid to explain sin. His life is so clear I guess. Anyone who would praise the Lord for a car wreck and then get seven cars free the next day must be doing something right. There are just so many examples.

About the Catholic nuns who have educated her, Rena says

> I learn best by just talking with and relating to specific people. Maybe the teachers should talk about themselves, not just the nuns...it's hard to relate to a Sister.

"Participating in the Past's Stories" is a third sub-theme under the theme <u>story</u>. David speaks of the trust that he came to have in God through the shared pasts of his family.

> I've had a lot of situations in our house where it's been a miracle the way it turns out. You need money and the next day it's there. My brother didn't have any friends so we prayed for some friends and sure enough he gets some friends. Basically you see how He works in certain situations so you have to trust Him in every situation.

The story of the Bible is, for David, a particular kind of past story. But for Rena the form and method of emodiment and transmission of the past in the Bible is problematic.

> David: I think it is a history and a story put together...sort of like a breviary in the sense of your life. It shows you what to do. It combines a history of what the world was and how people got to do things and how the great men did their things. It's more or less a guideline than a living book.
>
> Rena: They (students) are not taking what the teachers and the Bible are saying seriously. It's a joke, something to make fun of. It's fine for here and now in the classes and when the teachers are around, but I don't think they really believe it.

For Rena, the story of the past of her church hurts and confuses as it informs and transforms her.

> I was quite disappointed taking the Reformation in social studies because I learned just how dirty the church has been. It's been through some pretty bad times and I'm not proud of it...I think you have to look at things in the past to learn from them, like Hiroshima...to correct them.

When asked what in the past has led her to believe in Jesus, Rena says:

> God is good. And you always want to believe in, to follow, what's good. I mean from the time you are little there is good and there is bad. If you do something good you are rewarded and you <u>are</u> good.

"Participating in the Future's Stories" is a fourth sub-theme under the theme <u>story</u>. Trust and faith in a God who contributes to this vision seem to be part of the pedagogic process that Rena experiences. For her, an initial step in forming a vision is when teachers share their knowing and doing.

> You need to present the concept then go over it...do it together, then keep doing it together. It bothers me when we are told to do something when we don't know. If you are going to learn why service is an essential part of Christianity, then just say a little of why and do it...it will make sense as you go along. God is there.

<u>Theme Two: Community</u>

<u>David's Community: Alliance Christian Community</u>

Alliance Christian Community is characterized by a number of themes. One theme is that school is an extension of the home. Another is that the school stands at the crossroads of a battle between the secular world and the Christian world. Removal of

Christian children from public schools is seen as a necessity. A third theme is an emphasis on discipline. The staff are to support a certain dress code, behavior, and an accountability for all actions and academic work.

I observed David throughout the year in this atmosphere. The high school students became used to me as I wandered the halls or stepped into the classrooms. As the school became familiar to me, and I to the school, guards were dropped and the real life of the community revealed itself. I came to be accepted, unobtrusive, a part of the school fixture. Students would neither acknowledge my presence nor reject me. They did not seem particularly interested in what I was doing. At times, the negative talk in the staffroom about some unrepentant child or about the pastor at some church asking for more money surprised me. Yet, I came to know these people as teachers who took their mandate to educate in a "Christian way" very seriously. Teachers were genuinely concerned about their students' welfare.

Rena's Community: Kerygma High School

Kerygma is an alternative Catholic high school of slightly more than one hundred students. From the beginning, the school attempted to invite "something radical." The philosophy of Kerygma states that the school should help students learn

> to work at learning how to become a faith-community that truly reverences the uniqueness of each person; that is willing to speak the truth in love; to support each other in the laying down of our lives in service; to live cooperatively in an interdependent world, infusing all of life with the justice that flows from reverence.

Kerygma opened in 1982 and, in what was clearly a step out of the existing government-funded Catholic High School system, offered itself as a school with a difference. Teachers are to genuinely care for the students; to radiate warmth, interest, and enthusiasm for life; and to challenge students to develop their full potential as humans. For Rena, the single most distressing aspect of Kerygma was that the school's philosophical notions of Christian atmosphere, reverence and respect, did not permeate many of the students' day to day lives.

"Understanding" is a sub-theme to the theme Community. David feels misunderstood and continues to hide who he really is. I asked him once to describe an ideal teacher. He said:

> ...a teacher that is willing to understand your personality without giving you a hassle. If you ask them a question or anything, they'll listen to you at least and give you feedback on it.

David feels that there is almost nobody in his community, and particularly among his female teachers, who understands him. He feels that he is "the guinea pig in the family" and is treated like a "mature man" one day and "a little kid" the next day. He handles this saying "I just let it go, hibernate in my room."

I asked Rena once if her school allows her to be herself. She said:

> Well, the only way they wouldn't be is by not allowing you to ask questions, or asking questions that are not answered. If I have a question, I'd like an answer; I don't want to be told that that's just nothing.

One sub-theme of the theme Community is "informing." The community informs David and Rena about the external nature of

their religious orientations. Rena's community, for example, tells her how to serve in the community and about the history of her church. David suggests that he is informed "about the things of God." David is informed about the Bible, as interpreted in the evangelical tradition.

David expresses a strong desire to share the experiences of his teachers and parents.

> David: They should tell us what's right or wrong <u>after</u> letting us examine (issues).
>
> Bernie: What's the point then of letting you examine?
>
> David: If we get it wrong then we've got to be told that the other thing is right.
>
> Bernie: What should this school be teaching for?
>
> David: I think it was made to give young people a better insight into the things of God...Also, not to get them into public school and everything that goes on there. Not to be tempted by things as much as they would be.

Rena has a different level of conscientization about the purpose of her school and its integration of God into the curriculum.

> Bernie: How can this school help you know what is wrong?
>
> Rena: Well, informing your conscience. You have to have a wide variety of information sources so you can see what is right and wrong and you can discuss it from a Christian or Catholic viewpoint...or a personal viewpoint because so many of our opinions will differ from the churchs'. You discuss it in all sorts of different lights to come to a consensus because no one can really say whether it is right or wrong. In mathematics there is God. There is God in social studies, church history. I would restructure everything <u>not</u> to go around God, but right to Him.

Rena gives a hint about how she sees the community striving

to inform. To Rena, there are so many "corrupt people and so many bad people that there needs to be some institution that puts out good people instead of bad people."

For David, the community should give the road map but leave the journey to him. Does his school inform him how to live as a Christian?

> It does, but it doesn't. It will teach you that it's tough out there but it's even tougher if you are a Christian. But, it also gives you ways to be with them, but be with other Christians, too. So you do have someone that's not always on your back so it encourages you to keep in the Christian circle but not be locked up in a cage.

A third sub-theme in the theme Community is "atmosphere." Rena believes that atmosphere can best be described as "cooperation in spirit."

> To create an atmosphere you generate an atmosphere. You need enthusiasm for life and living. To make the atmosphere work you need a lot of vitality. To create an atmosphere you need a community, people with the same beliefs as you...cooperation in the spirit.

A fourth sub-theme is that the Community has "models." Models of others are particularly significant when they help to form personal life-responses and ideas. Rena suggests:

> If you teach religion in a way that is..."shut up, this is religion" or "this is religion class"...you are separating what you are teaching from yourself. It's hypocritical...teachers have to be fairly together with what they are bringing to the students...I don't know how you would distinguish a good Catholic from a bad Catholic, but I think they should have to be practicing Catholics...I know a Catholic single teacher in a Catholic high school. That's not very "Catholicy." I don't think that sort of thing should happen, yet nobody can be perfect.

A fifth sub-theme is "serving." Rena sees serving as

essential to her Christianity. She suggests that it is important for her to help others "grow." David's experience seems to suggest an inability to link practical service to the community outside his home, church, or school. When asked if he should be doing more service in the community, he says:

> I don't know. Other schools do stuff like that. If they want to, okay. I don't care. I'm not into stuff like that. I've done a couple of car washes and stuff like that. They should just let the kids learn...they didn't come here to have Bibles thrown at them.

Theme Three: Growth

A third theme that emerged from this research was the theme of growing. I became aware early in the study that growing for David and Rena was largely an internal phenomenon. Yet, there seems to have been relatively little time spent by teachers attempting to understand the interior wants and needs of either David or Rena. The majority of teaching time was spent presenting the content: the foundations, systems, and doctrines of Christianity. Teachers told me that the power to sponsor growth resided in these "externals." I observed that even attempts to understand students wants did not ensure that teachers could provide pedagogical encounters that sponsored growth. There was not, in either situation, a clearly articulated method for linking the interiority, or the inner unfolding, with the external. If synthesis occured, it happened in unplanned ways, in the hidden curriculum in times and situations where David and Rena were modelling someone they respected.

To illustrate, Rena wants to grow to be respected by her

family and to please God. For Rena, the times of greatest joy, peace, and transcendence were times with her family, times going to conferences where male speakers were presenting, and going home and just being thankful for her life. School was not mentioned. To David, the nexus of his growing remained unclear. His teachers and he seemed unable to cut through his general frustration to find inroads into understanding his interiority.

David and Rena often asked me my opinion on "large" questions of life, questions on which they were clearly deliberating. Rena asked me so many "Why?" questions that the hunger to know began to be reborn in me. Her first questioning was a search for correct answers. Subsequent questioning sought wisdom about what to do with the answers that were coming and, finally, deciding to act accordingly. David faced problems of meaning in his life. He said often that teachers should tell him what things in the Bible mean, and that all he needs to do is to memorize. Later things will make sense. But, he also wanted to know what Bible passages meant for his life right now.

For both David and Rena, judgment occured when they were interested in what other people were saying in debates over important issues. The content of the Christian story became most important in such debates. This was also the area where Rena's frustration with irrelevant religion classes was most evident. Doing emerged as David and Rena took personal responsibility, and were engaging in praxis, authentic praying, loving, and faithing. Sadly, David said he acted largely to "keep others from knowing what he did."

Rena spent eight years refusing to forgive a nurse who might have saved her father's life. Yet, all the time she admitted that she was deliberating over the notion of forgiveness, asking about it, and judging her own actions. Finally, as she understood what the Bible said and what was right for her to do about forgiveness, she understood forgiveness, and forgave the nurse in her heart.

The first sub-theme of Growth is "wanting." David's discussion shows his external focus on a deterministic God who can override his internal desire to do what he "wants." David states that no one can make a person do anything he doesn't want to do. He stays away from evil "by not doing it. Stay away from it. Ask God not to let you into a situation where you will do it...so you just stay away."

Rena's wanting has most to do with her personal journey in relation to her family. Her family is intrinsically important because her wanting points toward them. She says:

> I think my family is the most important influence because I want to be as important a part of our family as our older brother who has accomplished so much in my eyes and my sister's and my mom's.

"Deliberting" is a second sub-theme of Growth. Rena suggests that growthis " only up to you." Living is "about, collecting new ideas, encouraging new people, like a sponge taking in new ideas." David says that a person should basically "look at the pros and cons. You ask yourself one question...would Jesus do this? For other things, it is obvious. It says right in the Bible, don't do it."

Rena needs to deliberate at a feeling level in order to be

responsive. She tells me that "I'm taking a risk saying this to you. Maybe a lot of people, even my friends, would frown on what I'm saying. But I think it's what I feel about things that causes me to act." David's deliberations are much more strongly influenced by the Bible. As his teacher, Mrs. Neibhur, once said,

> They have to become so saturated in the word of God...so it looks to them that they have their feet solidly on Jesus. When a decision comes along, they'll remember the Bible passage and will act on it.

"Understanding" is a third sub-theme to the theme Growth. Rena questions to understand. When asked, she suggested how she had come to accept death:

> I think it was hard to understand, especially if you believe in a God because why would He let it happen? You really start to question, but through your questioning you get a bigger, firmer faith when you finally get through the questioning and have a few answers.

David understands now in a way that does not animate his authentic choice of a Christian lifestyle.

> It [Christianity] means something, but I guess it wouldn't be as important to me now than if I was older. I'm at that age when other things are more important...it's like people at my age are concerned about the present what I can get now than what's in the future and all that holy stuff.

David and Rena decide differently. David suggests that he doesn't have "that much discrepancy over what I usually do or shouldn't do. I have basically a lifestyle cut out for me...9 to 3." Rena shares ideas with her friends. This sharing helps her make decisions. She has "a lot of friends who aren't Catholic but...I get other ideas from them, but I have other friends in the youth group who are Catholic and I get ideas from them too...We

share."

How have teachers helped David with his decisions? They have "probably showed me...told me, exampled me, how a Christian is supposed to act...I see how it works in other people's life so I can decide to try it in my life."

"Doing" is a fifth sub-theme under the theme Growing. Rena and David are co-creators of their personal journey. Rena names adults who are able to positively assist her doing. These adults assist by knowing her and by sharing expectations. Rena says:

> Being the best I can be is stretching myself to the limit or farther than I have been before. If I did something good, I want to do it better. As far as who's best, a lot of people put into me my own expectations. I know my own capabilities and how far I have to stretch myself to grow and friends and family and church help, too.

David associates much of his Christianity with doing. He uses phrases like "staying away from," "behaving properly," "practicing (being a Christian)," and not getting "carried away." The following exchange shows some of David's ideas about Christianity and doing.

> David: I'm not really excellent and I'm not for sure bad. It's just that I read the Bible, pray and quote, do all the Christian stuff and I don't get into drugs or anything like that...I'm still your average mischievious kid. I'm not really unchristian in my actions if you know what I mean.
>
> Bernie: Is this school helping you become a better person?
>
> David: It's helping me become a lot of things, but it doesn't help me become a better person. It doesn't teach me how to like other people because everyone is fitted in here anywhere, not like the public school where you have to earn them to like you.

"Modelling" helps David and Rena grow. Rena looks to male

models, and readily admits that the loss of her father when she was nine years old has been a factor in her life. She sees that

> Teachers have been models. Well, I've always looked up to a few teachers. They were males, and I had just lost my dad and I was really looking for someone like that to look up to.

David discusses female teachers in his school.

> They (female teachers) do not understand how males are because 90% of our female teachers are single and do not know what a growing boy acts like. They think that all boys are macho womanbusters.

Sometimes teachers can get too pushy. According to David,

> ...my favorite teachers talk about God when the subject is open, but they don't push it. I've been asked: "Aren't you sick of having the Bible crammed down your throat?" I feel that with some of these teachers, not all. Their goal is to convert and teach everyone a new doctrine everyday. If they would only let the students become and just steer them along here and there to keep them straight.

Theme Four: Meaning

The most vigorous aspect of the theme Meaning was that David and Rena were actively engaged in "meaning-making." They were not as concerned with the uncovering of the meanings others have as they were in making sense themselves of Christianity, Christian religious education, school, teachers, and church. David suggests that the "biggest way to learn is to be there, even if you don't understand it. If you are there long enough, you'll understand it." David's way of making meaning reflects his particular evangelical, or as his father named it "Bibliocentric" Christian experience. But, David's reliance on other sources seemed to confuse him, at times, about what his life meant and whose meaning

he, indeed, had.

Bernie: How do you know why certain behaviors are bad?

David: Because people tell me they are and give me certain examples "if you do this look at what happens."

Bernie: Is there anything you just know yourself, or is it all that someone has told you?

David: I can't really say because I've always been told. I can't say...there are some things where common sense tells you, Christian or not...

Bernie: How can the school help you know, and other students know, why certain behaviors are good or bad?

David: Because I guess they tell you. They can't do anything else...they're not superhuman.

Bernie: What is the one thing you are learning?

David: I'd say...well...I can't say I've learned anything. I've gone to church all my life and my dad is a pastor and I've heard all the sermons. I've learned a couple of new principles but not anything major!

Bernie: What could the school have done to help you learn something major?

David: Explain it a little more. When we went to Bill Gothard, well when you are a teenager it sounds like he is just knocking, just tearing everything down, ripping you apart and not giving you anything to build on to your good. I can see it from an adult perspective, the preacher, but it's like he is tearing you apart. We had little positive in that seminar.

David confessed to performing according to how he perceived other people were perceiving him and not according to his own meanings and understandings.

Bernie: How do you know a thing is bad?

David: The obvious one is you don't have to say it. You know it's wrong and things that are right to someone and wrong to you...Well, if it hurts anyone it is obviously wrong. That's quite obvious. If it brings reputation of anything lower than what people thought, or if it takes something away from someone that could have made them better, then it's wrong. But if you don't

> really know, then I guess it's up to...how people treat you for doing it.

I asked David regularly what Christian religious education meant to him. His answers always reflected the tension between his wanting a personal answer and relying on the answer being presented to him. He says:

> You shouldn't learn to know the proper sequence. This is for English and other subjects. Christian religious education is different. If you are going to learn Bible, it should be on what you think about and what it means to you. What good is it to memorize and not know what it means. Instead, though, here you are graded on what you can say...They should teach what it means now by showing you, not forcing you, then explain it and give examples and then I can read a book about it.

Rena had many of the same frustrations about meaning-making. She suggests that the Bible is a secondary source for her meaning-making.

> I don't really rely on the Bible too much. I don't know if I am not a good Christian or whatever but I get more out of people talking about things and reading, not necessarily the Bible...to me the Bible is filled with a lot of just rhyme, the parables, and it's hard to interpret them and that's, I guess, the major division in all the churches...I can understand how people can get so many different meanings out of one passage.

Discovering the meaning of Christianity for both David and Rena was one of my initial goals of the research. David defines Christianity in the following way:

> I don't want to backslide so I'm afraid...this will sound really dumb, but I'm afraid that if I backslide and seeing it's near the end...the "old dictator" (Satan) comes up and it's mark time, I might just be a fool and take the mark. So, I want to keep up the way I am.

Rena's definition of Christianity differs. She says:

> It's a lifestyle, not a religion because religion has rules. "You got to do this" and things that don't make any sense, "Don't do this and don't drink coffee." This, you can do basically whatever you want. It's really up to you how far you are, your advancement as a Christian.

Rena's Christianity means a mosaic of "being the best you can be," "doing Christian acts," "appreciating what there is at your fingertips," and "where you help others become all they can become." Rena suggests that, if she were teaching Christianity to others, she would "show both sides of the issue" and the "difference between Christianity and other religions." People should make the choice for themselves, she suggests. Rena's emphasis on Christianity as a "doing" activity remained constant throughout the year. She says about Christian action:

> I think if you act out of love or if you act out love it means more than if you sit there...it means more of a proven statement...I almost think it is more worthwhile to act (than to love on the inside).

Both students had ideas about what Christian religious education was and should be. David experienced Christian religious education as an external experience that could be described objectively. When asked to describe it, David focused on the actions of the teacher.

> The normal teacher in a public school will teach you what the curriculum is, but a Christian Religious Education teacher will branch out and show you how God ties into it sort of thing...it's something where the teachers open insights to the mind.

Rena seemed to experience two phases during the school year that led her to a meaning of Christian religious education. Phase one was her adjustment to a fact-oriented religion class that she

had some reservations about. Later in the year, Rena became more questioning and noted discrepancies between the purposes and atmosphere of Kerygma and the way that students there were living.

> Well, a lot of what we hear of religion is fact, fact, fact...I think it should be more an examining of things, of questioning the possibilities, of the things we might have...I always seem to come up with the idea that Christian religious education is an attitude, more so, it's not so much something you can teach with facts or rules. It's more something you learn by an atmosphere...by living it rather than teaching about it...Christian religious education means to reach kids in the way they should behave...in a loving attitude all the time, in every aspect of their lives.

David's world is not a hopeful place. He lacks vision for the world and for his life as part of this world. He wants to run away, to "live in the mountains and find himself."

> This world is going to have wars, inflations, taxes, electricity bills, insurance. Everything all adds up, things break down. Kids that, clothes this, house that, style that...money, money, money, and everything goes to pot. That's all it does. I just want to be healthy, no chemical foods.

David's actions seemed ironic. He relied on others to tell him how to act, but often sought the authenticity of acting in accordance with how he felt, not with what others were deciding his behavior should be. He "hated" being good, suggesting that "it's just like you are a priest, a bishop, a pope or something. I hate to be one of those guys. Always it's the same thing. Religious this and religious that. You can't do anything."

Rena's living was straightforward. No one was, in a pedagogical way, forcing another consciousness or way of being on her. She could say quite unaffectedly that when she feels good, God must be good.

> I get more out of just thinking God loves me. God would shine His pleasure on me...I know God feels good because I feel good about what I've done. If I do something really nice for someone, I think that that must be more important than...I can't think of an example...perhaps going to church...or having to pray at such and such an hour...or believe such and such.

For Rena, school gained meaning from the curriculum as lived. The school she attended was a good school with a good atmosphere. She was impressed that people at her school were not afraid to tell others they loved them. This attitude made a big difference to her. The general limitation of schools for Rena was that they were not able, by their nature and physical limitations, to help students spiritually become a community of discipleship.

> I think schools anyway are insensitive to the kids no matter what kind of school it is. I mean, school is a problem for all kids whether it is marks or assignments due. So I mean the academic part is always an opposing force. As far as the teachers, there are some people here who are able to come off their teacher level and talk with you one-on-one and help you that way than in a normal high school. I don't think in a large part schools can help you overcome a lot of problems.

Theme Five: God

The fifth and final theme that emerged from the research was the theme God. Every student in a private Christian school is acquainted with God. God is mentioned in prayers, school doctrine and philisophies, and in classrooms. Teachers and the school send messages to students, and students pick up these messages. David and Rena were typical of students in private Christian schools.

David pictured God as someone "who could zap you if He doesn't like you...someone who is in heaven and looks after all the things on the earth." God was far off and powerful. In most

ways, David's experience of God was no different than his experience with his teachers and his parents. God is to help when needed, and should not be there all the time telling what to do. David says:

> I see God as someone who is in heaven. He looks after all the things on earth. He puts all things right in the Christian life. He doesn't manipulate them, but if they ask for it He'll help them and if they don't He'll sit back and He'll remind you and send things along the way to get you back on the path, if you go astray. As for me to Him, He's basically the counsellor. He's not there all the time, like a teacher, "do this, do that...and if you don't get it done you're in trouble." He's not your parents where they don't tell you to do that but they are constantly looking at you expecting you to do it on your own. He's just there. If you want it, He'll do it and if you want Him to make you do it, He'll do it. But, if you don't want Him to He won't. I'm just the person who comes in and asks or doesn't ask.

When David is good, no God is required. When life is not going well David can "conversationally" ask God for help. If God doesn't help, the negative effects add up and David must devise his own way out of the problem. David sees no future, and "can't see myself living until I'm 25." If he saw that the world had a future, he would "start shaping up my act, getting ready for the big day (when Christ returns)."

God is pictured by Rena as someone who "gives me so much," has happiness as the purpose for humankind, and "is a friend, someone you can really love." Rena's picture of God is masculine. God can be both immanent and transcendent. He can move into someone's life and cause changes in a person's attitudes. Rena's God worked inside her, not in her external circumstances. Rena enjoys making meaning of God and the world because this is an activity we are supposed to do. Her purpose is to be grateful,

find meanings and purposes, and ask God for forgiveness after sinning. Rena's experience with God is good, and she talks to Him easily.

> He gives me so much, and I say thanks, maybe not as much as I should...I talk to Him. At night, I pray...I'm sure that God created man with a purpose in mind, I guess that man has sort of stumbled over this over the years...if we are happy with what He gives us...then that happiness is something He'll enjoy.
>
> People have to feel comfortable...I mean to make God a friend, someone you really can love. You really can't have Him way up there...I mean, He is, but you can't talk with Him that way. You have to be able to talk with Him not to Him only...I'd like to think God is working in my life, a plan for my life. This is what I want.

Conclusions

It is our conviction that praxis (the whole way people have of knowing and coming to know) and conversion (the Christian's coming aware of God's presence in his/her life) work together to inform the Christian's life of intended action. These concepts are in a dialectical as well as a hermeneutical relationship. That is, praxis and conversion influence each other and cause Christians to understand and reinterpret, with increasing awareness, their own lives and the part that conversion plays in their own faith response.

The direction of the relationship of praxis to conversion in David's and Rena's experience is from conversion to praxis. This is true more so in David's experience where students are not Christians if they have not been "born again," and therefore cannot engage in genuine Christian praxis. Since only born again Christians can experience a knowledge of God, non-Christians would

only be doing "good works," a pejorative term used by David to describe any actions that are outside the born again Christian's response to others and to Jesus Christ.

Praxis leading to conversion is not evident in David's experience. Conversion comes only through praying to God, repenting, and repeating what David's teachers named a "sinner's prayer." This prayer is a confession of one's sin and the acknowledgement that only God, through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, can make a person "right."

In Rena's experience, conversion was not a familiar concept. Rena believed she experienced "little" conversions all the time. From her conversions she would attempt to shift her actions and attitudes towards a more Christian response. For example, she felt that she needed to be more concerned about the needs of her fellow students. Her thinking became "converted." In this way conversion influenced praxis and not the reverse. The debate over which understanding of conversion is correct is theological, not practical. Schools, we believe, should promote both conversion and praxis and allow God to work His unique will for each student practically into their lives.

It is our conviction that the Christian story has an informing as well as a transforming function. It informs the foundations, doctrines, systems, language, and communications of believers. In David's experience, more than in Rena's, the Christian story was informing. This story, as it is literally told in the Bible, becomes David's situational basis for knowing how to live. The nature of this belief creates the flavor of

Christianity and Christian religious education that David experiences. This "flavor" is Bibliocentric and Christ-centered. God, David believes, has revealed Himself in the Bible particularly through Jesus Christ. Therefore, the most significant informing aspects of any Christian's life are (1) the Bible and (2) Christ. These revelations must, for David, influence pedagogy. Pedagogy must transmit the objective "facts" of the Bible. For David, this implies that Christianity must be a set of do's and don'ts.

In Rena's experience, the Christian story is meaningful when it can be translated to speak to her present, concrete life. The story is not so much iconic and informative as it is a personal revelation of God's love for her. She believes God loves her, regardless of her actions. Yet, God's love makes her want to live according to His will.

David suggests that it is important to see how Christ lived, why He helped people, how He kept His cool, and why He did not sin even though He was tempted. The human Jesus Christ presents an example of living that David can see, learn from, and appreciate. Rena, on the other hand, sees a Jesus not bound by time and place. In fact, God is the "truth." His message has relevance for her growth now as a person. Jesus saving her was not something that just happened two thousand years ago; it is happening today. Faith for Rena is much more trust oriented, while faith for David is much more action or behavior oriented. We believe that Christian schools need to trust the Christian story to both inform and transform the lives of its students.

It is our conviction that, if Christian religious education intends to teach students to act in the world as Christians who authentically integrate praxis with conversion, it must recognize and affirm the "life world" of the person. Participants in Christian religious education must begin to encounter their own personal stories and visions. Both teacher and student must, together, consciously name both their actions and their understandings in the name of Christian religious education. Christian religious education, if it is to be workable, must be considered.

The pedagogy David experiences begins first with recognition and affirmation of the Christian story. David encounters the Christian story directly, or in translated form through the presentation of doctrines, foundations, and systems. The purposes of his school and the structure of the curriculum there are designed to make available, reveal, and render clear the core truths of Christianity in the Bible as interpreted in the context of evangelical Christianity. The life-world of the student should eventually line up to the word of God, not the other way around. The story is used as a Christian validation for experiences and intended actions.

It is our conviction that reflection on one's personal action is crucial for Christians who wish to critically understand their own beliefs, assumptions, and actions. This reflection, in the Freirian sense, is the beginning of conscientization. Participants in Christian religious education, in a spirit of trust and in the realization of the potential existential danger

of uncovering their own rotten motives, must begin to decode their understandings and actions and engage in the question, "Why do I act like I act or believe like I believe?

David and Rena were capable of considering their beliefs and actions. As developmentalists have suggested, David and Rena could grasp eternal realities and project their beliefs and actions into other contexts. They could be critical and relate their lives to altruistic values. Rena, in particular and largely due to her reflective personality and temperment, enjoyed the activities of "decoding" we engaged in over the year. For her, this was a way to help her live a better Christian life (doing good for others and being grateful to God). We believe that schools should trust their students to grow and God to do His unique work.

In a pedagogical sense, much growth took place through the context of the conversations that I, as an adult, had with David and Rena, as students. These conversations did not come easily; yet, as the year progressed, they became a natural and an authentic part of our growth--mine and theirs. Powerful Christian religious education should provide opportunities for authentic conversation between teachers and students. Both can inform and transform the other.

It is our conviction that authentic conversion and praxis in the form of a faith response can occur only when the Christian story is presented in a meaningful form and through a variety of pedagogical modes. Only then can it influence the story and vision of the individual Christian. By making available the

teachings of both Jesus Christ and the Judeo-Christian tradition, the participants can truly be informed and transformed. For Christian religious education, this implies selectivity. An important question is: "What is to be conserved and highlighted?" It means a recognition of the work of the developmentalists and a better understanding and acceptance of personal and historical realities. It means attention to the pedagogy of the models we adopt to present the story. We must make problematic what we consider knowledge and how we believe we come to know.

As David and Rena come to understand themselves and the reasons they do what they do, they are forced to answer questions about themselves. These questions are dynamic and take energy. David and Rena really wanted to know the answers to both external questions (Why are things like they are in this world?) and internal questions (Why do I act like I do?) At times, David and Rena attempted to make meaning of the stories of Jesus, the church, the way their teachers were, or the behavior of their fellow students. They did so in their own ways, and sought to refine their own ways. They rejected necessarily their teachers' ways into sublating, for example, the teachings of Jesus and the foundations, doctrines, systems, language, and communications of the Judeo-Christian tradition. David and Rena were their own people, and had to understand their own becoming. Both David and Rena wanted to know what 'things' meant for them.

To David and Rena, this phase is critical. They are at a crossroads. Throughout the year, I suspected that David remained at the place of only seeking to know "personally." He continually

pushed back against the Christian story as it was being presented, particularly by his teachers, because it was repetitive. As he said, he was learning nothing new. Rena seemed to grow in her ability to understand the Christian story through her own living.

It is our conviction that Christians must reinterpret the Christian story and vision from their own contexts, appropriating the truths and letting the story affirm or, in some cases, rebut their own stories. For Christian religious education, this means dialogue and articulation among participants. Personal answers must be sought for what really is a personal question: "How might I live more faithfully in the context in which I "am being" now?" Total respect and love for individuals by their teachers is required here.

David's and Rena's experience highlights the struggles of adolescence and identity formation. They are sometimes frustrated by their inability to make sense of their external and internal worlds. They desire to have their perceived wants met. For them, any dialogue about these personal, ostensibly non-spiritual issues is highly "spiritual" and extremely interesting. There are many aspects of their own stories that they want affirmed. It seemed that Rena, more so than David, realized a need for a spiritual director or discipler who would, in respect and love, help her articulate personal answers to her personal questions.

It is our conviction that Christianity is a faith-way of being in the world that emerges from and influences one's relationship with God and others. For Christian religious education, this requires both a personal and a community response

characterized by faith, hope, and love. Christian religious education needs a community that can help to transform and itself be open to transformation. This community includes the church, school, community, and home. Its members must be open to conscientization about its dynamics of authority, freedom, conversation, liberation, sin, and righteousness. In essense, this community must offer living a faith response to the hope and vision of the Kingdom of God.

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